

NORTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES
OFFICE OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY



Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with Chief Justice Cheri Beasley
SHE.OH.011
July 25, 2019

Interview Information:

Interviewer: Ellen Brooks

Interview Location: Raleigh, North Carolina

Interview Runtime: 01:31:46

Transcribed By: Julia Kane, October 2019

Reviewed By: Gretchen Boyles, June 2020

Collection: "She Changed the World" Oral History Project

Interview Summary:

This oral history interview with Chief Justice Cheri Beasley covers her general life history with a focus on her legal career and her judicial positions on the Twelfth District Court of North Carolina, the North Carolina Court of Appeals, and the North Carolina Supreme Court. Chief Justice Beasley assumed the role of chief justice of the supreme court in March 2019. Prior to her appointment as chief justice, she served as an associate justice on the court from 2012 to 2019 and served on the North Carolina Court of Appeals from 2008 to 2012. She also served on the Twelfth District Court bench prior to her election to the North Carolina Court of Appeals.

Chief Justice Beasley was born in Tennessee and raised in both Tennessee and Colorado. She received her higher education degrees in New Jersey (Douglass College) and Tennessee (University of Tennessee College of Law). She moved to North Carolina in 1992, first working in the Research Triangle Park and Wake County District Attorney's Office before relocating with her husband, Curtis Owens, to Cumberland County, North Carolina. She and her family remained there until her election to the North Carolina Court of Appeals, at which time they moved to Wake County.

In the interview, Chief Justice Beasley discusses growing up as a friendly and pensive child with a tight-knit family. She describes how her relationship with her mother instilled within her the importance of service, engagement, and activism within her community. She talks about her college and law school experiences and meeting and marrying her husband, Curtis.

Chief Justice Beasley describes her work as a public defender, her appointment to the Twelfth District Court bench, and her first campaign with her family and community in Fayetteville. After several years of service on the bench, she ran for a seat on the North Carolina Court of Appeals and won, then was appointed to the North Carolina Supreme Court. Chief Justice Beasley details the richness of daily collaboration with other judges on both the supreme court and the court of appeals.

Chief Justice Beasley received her LLM from Duke University School of Law in 2018. She contrasts her experiences as a young woman at the University of Tennessee College of Law and her experiences returning to school for a legal degree after many full years as a judge. She cherishes the connections she formed at Duke with her fellow classmates.

Chief Justice Beasley discusses the various bars of which she has been a member and some of the accomplishments and initiatives of which she is most proud. She describes challenges faced, the centrality of diversity to modern leadership, and her definition of success. She notes the intergenerational challenges and successes within her own family with an emphasis on the importance of being present and adaptable. Chief Justice Beasley continues to search for ways to promote more compassionate justice both within and outside of her role as chief justice.

Biographical Sketch:

Chief Justice Cheri Beasley was born on February 14, 1966 in Nashville, Tennessee to Lou Beasley. She attended Douglass College of Rutgers University (Political Science and Economics), the University of Tennessee College of Law (Juris Doctor), and the Duke University School of Law (Master of Law). Chief Justice Beasley married Curtis Owen, and the two have twin sons, Thomas and Matthew. She has served as a public defender, a judge on the Twelfth District Court, the Court of Appeals, and as an associate justice on the North Carolina Supreme Court. She currently serves on the North Carolina Supreme Court as chief justice.

Archivist's Note:

Transcriptions reflect the original oral history recording. Due to human and machine fallibility transcripts often contain small errors. Transcripts may not have been transcribed from the original recording medium. It is strongly suggested that researchers engage with the oral history recording as well as the transcript. Timestamps are approximate.

Interview Transcript:

Brooks: Today is July 25, 2019. This is an interview with Cheri Beasley, currently the chief justice of the North Carolina Supreme Court. This interview is being conducted for the North Carolina State Archives "She Changed the World" Oral History Project. The interviewer is Ellen Brooks. So, if we can start at the beginning, and you can tell me where and when you were born.

Beasley: Um, I am from Nashville, Tennessee, and I was born in 1966, uh, February 14.

Brooks: That's my mom's birthday.

Beasley: That's so funny.

Brooks: Um, and tell me a little bit about your early life.

Beasley: [coughs] Well, it was, um, simple, I think. I, you know—my mom and I—and my grandparents, and my aunts and uncles, and it was nice that we sort of had a really close-knit, um, family. And that little universe, as a kid, seemed to be just so important, to have—and I have a cousin who's my age, and so to this day, I still talk to her every day, because we're only children—but that universe, I think, was nurturing and felt really big at the time. You know, I'm from Nashville, Tennessee, which wasn't the Nashville of today. It was really sort of a big town. And I remember the summer after my freshman year in college—it was the first time I ever saw a homeless person. So, it didn't have big city problems; it was small and homey and comfortable, and it just felt good.

Brooks: What did your mom do for a living?

Beasley: My mom, when I was little, was a professor at the University of Tennessee at the College of Social Work, and the college is located in Knoxville, Nashville, and Memphis, and so eventually she ended up becoming associate dean of the Nashville branch.

Brooks: Wow, that's great. And was your father in the picture?

Beasley: My father and I—my parents divorced when I was very young, and so we had sort of a relationship over the years, but it was really my mother who was sort of the mainstay in my life.

Brooks: And tell me a little about what type of kid you were.

Beasley: [laughs] From my perspective—

Brooks: Sure.

Beasley: —or hers?

Brooks: Yeah, yours. [laughs]

Beasley: You know, I think probably even as a child I was pensive. Um, as an only child I certainly understood playing by myself, but I had friends. It was a very close neighborhood, and so I had friends across the street, and my babysitter lived across the street. Um, and I think I was friendly. By the time I was eight—so from the time I was eight to ten, my mom and I moved to Denver for her to get her PhD at the University of Denver. And, um, so I guess I was—probably like all children don't know that they are—I was able to adapt, as you can well imagine that Denver was very different from everything that was familiar in Nashville with family. We didn't know anybody—we did. We actually knew one person from Nashville who had gone out ahead of my mom, a year before her, and she started on her PhD first, and so she was like an aunt, if you will; I'd known her all of my life. Um, but, so building community in Denver was amazing at eight years old. We lived in graduate student housing, and it was just an amazing experience. I mean, obviously Denver's very beautiful, but it was also really inspiring, as I look back. And I remember being very proud of my mom—that we were embarking on this journey together—and I don't know that I fully understood what a PhD was, but I knew it was a really big deal, and I knew that this was a powerful moment for both of us, frankly. And I knew that we needed to do this so that she could go on in her career and continue to do great things, and the experience in Denver was wonderful. And then, certainly, coming back to Nashville after that was pretty awesome, as well.

[00:04:53]

Brooks: What type of student were you?

Beasley: A good student. For the most part, I've always been a good student; I've always liked to read, always engaged in class, always really engaged in, um, probably subject matters centered around people and understanding people, um, even as a child, and obviously I didn't think about it quite that way. But that makes a lot of sense, given the fact that my mom received her MSW, DSW, and was social work-centered, if you will. And service was always really important for our family. And so I remember at six years old, walking door to door, literally with what was called a 45 record—for those who remember what that is—um, campaigning for a mayoral candidate. So those pieces of my life have always kind of been present. It's always been important to give back. It's always been important to care about civic responsibilities, even at the age of six. [laughs]

Brooks: And was there a point when you were younger when you started thinking about a career and what you might want to be when you grew up?

Beasley: Probably in very esoteric terms, you know, as a child I always thought I wanted to be a pediatrician, and all it took was going to college and taking my first biology class and enjoying the class but really sort of seeing myself somewhere else. But no, I really didn't know what I wanted to do, and I honestly can tell you that I

wasn't really sure what I wanted to do until after I went to law school. I mean, when I applied to graduate school, I applied to several, not just law schools, but business, and public administration, and hospital administration, and social work, and some other programs, and really not very methodically decided to go to law school.

Brooks: What was your first job?

Beasley: My first job was as a junior camp counselor, um, for a day camp that was a part of a Presbyterian Church. And it was a big, beautiful campus—where the camp was located—and there was horseback riding, and swimming, and, um, crafts, and all kinds of really neat activities for young people. And I was fourteen years old, and I worked from nine a.m. to three p.m., and it was an amazing experience. The counselors were eighteen, and so most of them had already begun college or were about to go to college, and it was neat working with them, and there were certainly some older overseers, if you will, of all of us young people, but it was great. It was great to be with so many young people. It was great to, um, to—I mean, I looked up to everybody who was there because I was one of the youngest there—and it was neat for that to be my first job.

Brooks: Did you do that multiple years, or just one?

Beasley: I did it two years, and then I think my next job, I believe, was at a pizza parlor over the summer. Um, and then I think my next job was at O'Charley's restaurant as a server. Oh, and I also worked at the Spaghetti Factory. It was a restaurant called the Old Spaghetti Factory, and I was a busboy [both laughing].

Brooks: Um, can you tell me—so you went through high school. How did you decide that you were gonna go on to college, and how did you decide where you were gonna go?

Beasley: I knew that I wanted to go to school in the Northeast. Um, we—my mom had had lots of national conferences over the years—and we'd spent, almost every year, frankly, going to Broadway shows, and we spent quite a bit of time in New York. And so I decided that's where I wanted to go to school and applied to a lot of places, and my best friend was going off to school in Boston, so I thought about Brandeis and did apply and was accepted there, as well. But I ultimately decided on Douglass College of Rutgers University, um, because at the time it was the largest women's college in the country.

[00:09:48]

And though I was obstinate about attending women's college, going to the campus to visit was eye-opening. It was wonderful to see so many women on campus, bustling about, headed to classes. It was wonderful to see women in leadership, and it was wonderful to get a sense, going on campus, of women being empowered, uh, to take responsibility for their education but also to be engaged in

exploring the world around them and to really appreciate that the world around us may be in sight, but it also may extend well beyond the things that we can see for ourselves and for the people around us. And I was enchanted immediately and determined that even though I thought I wanted to go to school in New York City, that that was the place for me.

Brooks: Do you remember why you were pushing against the idea of going to an all-women's college?

Beasley: Well who wants to do that? I mean, you know, I liked boys at the time, and my perception of what that meant was limiting. And boy, was I wrong. It was just an amazing experience.

Brooks: Yeah. Um, did you pick a major while you were there?

Beasley: I did. I did. My majors were political science and economics, and I had concentrations in accounting and finance.

Brooks: That's a lot. Yeah. Did you do any extracurriculars?

Beasley: I did a lot of extracurricular activities. Very involved in student life; I was a house chairwoman, and I think in other places you call that an RA. I mean, everything. I was president of my dorm, but the college had a very, very active campus life and opportunities. Um, I was engaged in a lot of activities, which allowed me to spend a lot of time with the dean of the college. And there was a time when I was at her house weekly for dinner listening to various speakers. Um, so it was just an amazing opportunity to really—I mean, who goes to the dean's house weekly for dinner? So, the opportunities were there, and I just seized them. I thought they were—it was just such an amazing place.

Brooks: Mm. Did you spend a lot of time in New York, then, still?

Beasley: You know, my mom was right about the New York thing. It was good, frankly, that it was about a thirty-five-minute train ride away, and so I did. I did, and my mom continued to travel there for conferences, so I usually met her there, and we shared dinner or whatever, but yeah, I still spent a lot of time in New York.

Brooks: Um, so what came after Douglass College.

Beasley: Douglass. I took a year off after college, came back to Nashville, and thought about what my life might look like. I was a server at O'Charley's during that period of time, and I was also sort of an intern, if you will, at the Tennessee Human Relations Commission where we investigated claims of discrimination based on race, and gender, and handicapped capability in places of public accommodation, housing, and employment. And I think, in large part, it was there, that—even before then I knew I wanted to be an advocate of some kind—but I think, in large part, it was there that I realized that law might be my

profession of choice. And so, like I said, I applied to different kinds of graduate schools and ultimately decided on law school.

Brooks: Mm. And where?

Beasley: I am a graduate of the University of Tennessee College of Law.

Brooks: And how did you decide that's where you wanted to go?

Beasley: Well, I was headed to North Carolina. By then I had met the man that I am now married to, [laughs] and he was in North Carolina, so I applied to North Carolina schools, applied to Campbell's law school, Carolina, and North Carolina Central, and Carolina was my first choice, and I was waitlisted there, accepted to Campbell, and accepted to North Carolina Central University, was headed to Central, put down the deposit, and about three weeks after law school started I received a full scholarship to University of Tennessee.

Brooks: Wow. Hard to turn down.

Beasley: That's why I am a graduate of the University of Tennessee.

[00:14:56]

Brooks: Um, so can you tell me how you and your husband met?

Beasley: We met, um, unbeknownst to us, he was headed to a party with his best friend, and I was headed to a party with my dear friend. We didn't know each other, but his best friend and my good friend were siblings.

Brooks: Oh.

Beasley: And, um, and so we met at this party, and of course we trusted the people that we were with, and so we just hit it off. And we've been married for twenty-six years now, so.

Brooks: Um, so, anything about law school that kinda stands out to you? Was it what you expected it to be?

Beasley: I can't say that law school was what I expected it to be. Law school was difficult for a host of reasons. I mean, the coursework is certainly challenging, but it was a difficult time with the University of Tennessee. At the time, the university was under a consent decree around repairing, if you will, racial discrimination. And it was a contentious time at the university and a contentious time at the law school, so it was not a comfortable place to be. Um, so that atmosphere, along with the challenge of the coursework made it a difficult time. As I look back on it—and it was very difficult. It wasn't just difficult for me. There was, frankly, animosity from some of the students that there was a consent decree on both sides, if you will, if there can be two sides. But white students were disenchanted that there was a consent decree, and that, um, and that students of color were probably not

there based on merit. And you can imagine how that made the students of color feel. And so, in hindsight, and as I've talked with my classmates over the years, both black and white, we've talked about what a difficult time that was, and as I've talked with students who were members of other classes, um—and it wasn't just the feeling of being ostracized, but as I've talked with other students and graduates as well—they talk about how they were treated by law professors. And so as I hear my peers in North Carolina talk about how wonderful Carolina's law school was, that was not the same kind of experience or environment that I had. I've been back to UT's law school several times since then, and we've had really frank discussions about what kind of a time it was, and the difficulty around it. And I think, in some ways, the law school is still sort of grappling with, um, the remnants of that time, and how best to move forward, and how best to make sure that the law college is diverse in all ways, and healthy and thriving. There are some great things happening there. It has the oldest clinic program in the country, and it is well-established, and so there really are great things happening there. But challenges remain, and so I think it's important to be aware of that, and I think the best way to think about how the law college moves forward and the law community moves forward there is to really be engaged in conversation around that.

Brooks: Was that the first time you've felt that kind of discomfort and that kind of conflict in your life?

Beasley: It's—it was the first time I had felt it in that way. It certainly wasn't the first time that I was aware that I was an African American young woman, and it certainly wasn't the first time—I mean, if you can imagine, I went to the state university of New Jersey—Douglass College is a part of Rutgers University—and I was the only person from Nashville, Tennessee, and very few people from out of state, period. And so, you can well imagine that as one of the few African Americans, period, and as certainly one of the few southerners there, if not the only—I think I finally met somebody there whose parents had moved to Nashville while she was in college, and so she was still from New Jersey.

[00:19:57]

But that was an interesting adjustment, as well. While my experiences were good, there were—often times that—there were lots of perceptions around race by my classmates. And I mean, but it was a great learning experience, too, for, I think, for them and for me. I mean, because I think the perception was that if you have black skin that there's this sort of this homogeneity around race where there's such cultural differences. I mean, my lifestyle was not at all the same as many African Americans in New Jersey and New York, and so there were real differences around who we were, and our blackness was vast enough to be such that we came from very different worlds, and it doesn't mean that we didn't have some commonalities, but those were not necessarily—it was just interesting to see how,

um, how all of us—all of my classmates, my roommates, and people of the college, and people around us—all grappled with the differences and the similarities around all of us. We were all women, and so there were similarities, clearly. But how we think about cultural differences, and how we make assumptions about people based on—whether it's race, or gender, and all of that, I think it was—there were some healthy and unhealthy ways in which we really sort of plotted all that out. But that's a part of life, you know? I mean, college wasn't the first time that I realized I was a black girl, either, so, you know, that's just life, and that's not necessarily a bad thing, either.

Brooks: And in spite of all the challenges in law school, how was the actual learning? How was the actual studying of law?

Beasley: It was challenging, I mean, law school was not easy.

Brooks: Yeah.

Beasley: It was challenging, but I also don't think that I can separate the two—

Brooks: Okay.

Beasley: —because the atmosphere was thick with lots of animosity and difficulty, and so, while I have professors who I think a lot of and remain in contact with to this day, it was a challenging period.

Brooks: What was your method of coping with that?

Beasley: Um, I had great friends and great faith, and I think just in the very same way that we all deal with challenges now in our lives—you know, we rely on family and faith and friends and outlets, and, um, I walked five miles every day—and so, you know, those kinds of things.

Brooks: Mm. So, um, did you have any clue of what was next, after law school?

Beasley: Um, I knew that the goal was to get to North Carolina. I really liked this guy [laughs] who ended up being my husband, Curtis, and so after law school I did come to North Carolina—shortly thereafter.

Brooks: And what year was that, just for the timeline?

Beasley: I came here in about 1992.

Brooks: Okay.

Beasley: I think.

Brooks: Um, and was Curtis from here? Is that why he was here?

Beasley: He has lots of family here, and like lots of African Americans, the Great Migration—you know, his family is from the sandhills area—and his parents were

looking for better opportunities. Dad's from South Carolina; mom from North Carolina, and they migrated to the Northeast. It's very common in families from this area. Families from Tennessee migrated to Chicago, Ohio. And so his mom was making plans to come back this way, and he'd always spent his summers in North Carolina, and so he was also looking for a better way of life, and so he decided to move to North Carolina.

Brooks: Did you have any hesitations leaving Tennessee? Did you plan to stay?

Beasley: Um, I love Nashville, and I certainly love my family and knew that making the move was going to be a big adjustment, and it was. And you know, as close as I am to my family, it was difficult moving to North Carolina. But, you know, still to this day—my mom is now deceased—but I see my family all the time. I'm either there, or they're here, or we meet somewhere in the middle.

Brooks: Yeah.

Beasley: So that's worked out really well.

Brooks: Yeah, not too big of a distance.

[00:24:54]

Um, so what was your first job when you moved here to North Carolina?

Beasley: My first job was—I honestly don't remember which exactly was my first job, but when I came here, I worked in a few companies in Research Triangle Park, in the law departments, doing mostly contractual work. And then after about a year, I wanna say, of that, I went to the DA's office in Wake County for a little bit of time and then took a job in Fayetteville at the public defender's office in—I think that might've been 1994.

Brooks: Okay. So how did you make any or all of those decisions for your career? Did you know you wanted to work at the DA's office?

Beasley: Um, I really enjoyed working for the corporations, but I did see myself in the courtroom. And so, I certainly enjoyed my very short time in the DA's office in Wake County and would have stayed there had there been a position available. Ironically, after I accepted the position in Cumberland at the public defender's office, a position did become available, and I was offered the position. Because I had accepted the position in Cumberland—I'm sure in hindsight, I could've gone back to say, you know, "I appreciate the offer here in Cumberland; I'm gonna stay here at the DA's office in Wake County"—but I felt the commitment. They committed to me, and I felt, since I had accepted, that I should go, and so I have absolutely no regrets about that.

Brooks: Can you tell me a little bit about that position, working with the public defender's office? What was kind of your every day like?

Beasley: I, um, started off representing people who were charged with misdemeanors, and after about six months there, I represented people who were charged with felonies and misdemeanors. And it was an amazing experience. Um, it was an amazing experience because I think Fayetteville is a very special place; it's a military community, and there, like many places, there's a great disparity around wealth and opportunity. The people are wonderful, and I think in great part, that experience was important—as I told you, you know, growing up in a big town, if you will, my exposure was, in so many ways, limited, and you know, I hadn't seen a lot of despair in my life before. And, you know, it was important to understand people and understand humanity, and the work was very meaningful, and I truly believe that my experiences there made me a better person. I think they made me a better lawyer. I think they made me a much better judge than I might have been. And I'm sure that because I really had the opportunity to appreciate humanity better, um, you know, to appreciate the fact that regardless of our stations in life, that we really all have the same hopes and dreams and fears and desires for ourselves and our families. And so, as much as I hope that I gave there, I certainly learned a lot, from the members of the office, but also from the people I represented and from their families. I mean, when somebody's charged with a crime, their families tend to be engaged, and there's a host of community around these folks, and these are everyday good, wonderful people, and I just think to be mindful. It doesn't mean that there should not be accountability around, you know, the commission of crime, but I think to relegate the work to just that oversimplifies the complexity of people's lives, and the oversimplification of what these kinds of circumstances can mean for families, and for victims of crimes, and for communities.

Brooks: And how long did you hold that position?

Beasley: For five years.

[00:30:18]

Brooks: Okay. Aside from the people that you're working with, and the people you're representing, did you have any mentors at that early stage of your career?

Beasley: I did. I had several. There were lots of great lawyers there who were not just in the office, but who were members of the bar. And I think it was a really robust bar, and I think because there were so—I don't know if it was because there were so many young lawyers, in the public defender's office, especially, but also in the district attorney's office—I felt that there was a wealth of lawyers who were willing and did give their time to teach and inspire and encourage, and it was a really awesome place to be a young lawyer.

Brooks: And what was next?

Beasley: And after serving in the public defender's office for five years, I sought a position on the district court bench, and, in 1999, I was appointed to serve on the bench by Governor Jim Hunt.

Brooks: So, what was your thinking behind wanting to be a judge?

Beasley: I had [laughs] worked really hard in the public defender's office. I was often in the office very early in the morning and leaving the jail late, late in the evening—eleven, twelve o'clock in the evening—and I was ready for a different kind of a pace. It was rewarding and exhausting—and probably not just physically exhausting, but also mentally exhausting in some ways—and so two positions became available. I can't really tell you that I necessarily saw myself as a natural candidate for a judgeship, but after some encouragement by colleagues, I sought it, and it worked out pretty well.

Brooks: Yeah. Can you tell me and anyone who isn't super familiar with how the court system works? So—you said it was the district court bench—so is there a specific court you were working with then?

Beasley: In North Carolina, there are district courts, there are superior courts, there's the court of appeals, and the supreme court, and the district and superior courts are trial courts. And generally speaking, the jurisdiction for district courts are misdemeanors, family court, juvenile court, and there are some civil matters, and traffic.

Brooks: And so, all of the judges in those courts are all appointed?

Beasley: In North Carolina, every judge must, at some point, stand election, but if there is a vacancy or the creation of a seat, then the governor fills that vacancy until the next general election.

Brooks: Ah, okay.

Beasley: So, I was appointed in 1999, and then my election was in 2002.

Brooks: So, what was your first impressions of being on the bench?

Beasley: Um, it was also an awesome experience. It was great. We had great staff; we had a great and very capable clerk's office, and law enforcement, and probation, and lawyers. And so, it was a great experience. I pretty much presided in all those courts I just described. I ultimately was a family court judge and a certified juvenile court judge. And the domestic bar in Cumberland County is fantastic; it's a well-learned bar, if you will, that works very hard, and I think, especially because it's a military community, there are some—I think it requires even more for lawyers to really understand the complexities of families and how mobile families can be and, you know, jurisdiction around custody, and figuring all that out when parents aren't in the same place, and when they both leave Cumberland County. So, it was an amazing experience.

[00:35:02]

Brooks: Yeah. And when you ran for election in 2002, what position were you running for?

Beasley: To remain on the district court.

Brooks: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about that first experience running for election?

Beasley: Well, um, it was quite an election. My opponent was on the school board in Cumberland at the time, a very well-established lawyer. And, you know, it was great. I enjoyed the election. By that time, our sons had been born, and they were about, I think, about eighteen months old, and so it was great to run with them. I didn't know until much later, as I've talked with consultants, that, you know, there's a perception around women, especially at the time, running with children and serving as a judge, and so, I didn't know I wasn't supposed to be walking door to door with our team, with our T-shirts on, and a tandem stroller and all that. I didn't know that I wasn't supposed to have my family pictured on my palm cards, and honestly, I'm kinda glad I didn't know. [laughs] It was an authentic feeling, and it was great to have the boys, in their own teeny little way, a part of what I do and part of the process, and it was great.

Brooks: Yeah. And your sons are twins.

Beasley: They are twins.

Brooks: Um, and so you didn't know until you were just talking with folks afterwards that this was quote-unquote not the way it was done?

Beasley: Well, I didn't have any consultants until I ran for the court of appeals [laughs].

Brooks: Okay.

Beasley: So, there was a whole lot that I didn't know—

Brooks: Sure.

Beasley: —that experts would be even thinking about, you know. It was a local race, and thankfully I had a lot of support, and, uh, great advisors, and we just weren't really having conversations about, you know, image, and children, and family, other than the fact that I think we just all assumed they would be included in whatever ways. And there were times that I took my sons to campaign events, and of course my husband was there, and it just didn't seem to be a big deal, but apparently in some instances it is a big deal.

Brooks: Yeah. Did you ever get any feedback from voters, either positive or negative, about your family?

Beasley: Well, you know, I think people in Cumberland have seen Matthew and Thomas grow up, and so they've just been a part of who I am, and so they've carved out

their own little lives in, you know, the community. In fact, I saw a woman just a couple weeks ago in Fayetteville, and she was talking about a time when she was holding both of them at an event, and they were babies So, the fact that people really embraced us as a family, and my candidacy—I couldn't have asked for anything more than that. And that feels good just around, you know, who we are and who that community is, and how special it is.

Brooks: Mm. This is one of those questions that is controversial, but I'm gonna ask it, and you can feel free to respond however you'd like, obviously. But what can you say about work-life balance, or family life and work balance? [laughs]

Beasley: I think—and I don't know that that's controversial—I do think that women are asked the question, and men tend not to be—but I also believe that, in so many ways, family is the balance. But I also have to tell you that I have a really incredible husband, and neither of us could have possibly, twenty-six years ago, known the journey that we would've taken together. And I can tell you that I would not have embarked on it in the same way if he hadn't been so willing to be a part, and to be supportive, and to share in this journey in the way that he has. My mom, until her passing—and she got us through the court of appeals race, if you will—and so she was very instrumental in being supportive, and really I wouldn't have run for the court of appeals, statewide, if she hadn't come to live with us.

[00:39:54]

So, at that point, she had a post-retirement post at Austin P. State University, and she loved it. She was teaching weekly and loved her graduate students, and she gave it up to be with us, which is incredibly special. But I was happy at the district court bench and would have stayed there if we didn't collectively have an agreement that she would be here with us, and be supportive, and so I'm grateful to her, as well.

Brooks: Besides knowing that you'd have that family support, what else kind of motivated you to run for the court of appeals?

Beasley: Um, at the time that I ran—and I wanna state this in the way I think it was—I think there was one judge that had experience in family law. And at the time, there was a lot of growth and change in family law, and case law, and decisions around family law, and there was concern in the family law bar around the state that more judges who had experience in family law be there, and so how I was the chosen one, I don't know, but that was a great part of why I decided to run.

Brooks: And what year was that?

Beasley: That was—the election was in 2008—but the decision to run was in 2000—probably seven. Maybe six.

Brooks: And so I'm just kind of curious about, generally, the difference between that election and the one you'd had previous. Seems like it was a bigger venue, bigger audience, just a bigger deal generally, so how did you approach that?

Beasley: Well, you know, the local election was county wide—and so it was Cumberland—and then the court of appeals, just like the supreme court, those are both statewide elections. Um, and it was important to me to make sure that I was doing my district court judge responsibilities every day, and so I didn't take time away from that to campaign, but it did mean that I was going to be away a lot of evenings. The commitment that I made to myself, and to my children, and to my family, was that I would wake up every morning at home, so that I could always have the time with our children in the morning and take them to school. And there were times when I was able to be there, other times—but I wanted to make sure that I had that consistent schedule with our children. And so I needed the support, and I needed to make sure that my children—by the way, my husband was also commuting to Research Triangle Park to work every day, that was the other thing—and so he wasn't going to be able to provide the same kind of coverage, so we needed my mom there. And if she wasn't able to be there—I mean, I asked her to give up a lot, and if she had said, "You know what, I don't wanna do that"—I just wouldn't've run and I would've been okay with it. But she did do it, which is just the coolest thing. So yes, the court of appeals, because it's statewide, and it takes about a year and a half, at least, to run—that's a long time.

Brooks: Yeah.

Beasley: That's a long time.

Brooks: What does your husband do?

Beasley: He is in clinical research.

Brooks: Um, so just tell me a little but about the campaign, and I am also mostly interested in, you know, leading up to—did you think you were gonna be elected? How was that type of like—kind of the end game, how did that play out for you?

Beasley: You know, the campaign was wonderful. I mean, every time I campaign, I meet so many wonderful people. And there are so many teachable moments. I mean, I learned a lot, but also, I mean, so many people still don't really know what judges on the court of appeals do, so everywhere I went, it was important to talk about it and ask people to also talk about it. And so a lot of that is what was occurring. I mean, every single day, regardless of where I was across the state, I was talking about, you know, the importance of the court of appeals, the importance of the work. And in terms of the end game, um, I really wish that I could tell you that I had thought about—I mean, spending a lot of time thinking about—you know, What happens if I win? What happens if I lose? I just made the decision to run. I thought it was work that I could do and do well, and that I would enjoy.

[00:44:55]

Um, and I mean, I wouldn't've run if I didn't think I had some chance. And it's hard to gauge all that, I mean, it's expensive to know—to have polling done around—what people think, and the reality is, regardless of how long you serve, it's hard to know how millions of people think, and it's also hard to, um, make sure that people understand that they're gonna be concerned about the races at the top of the ticket, but it's important to keep moving down the bottom of the ticket in order to see the races, and then, once they see the races, to know what to do once they get down there.

Brooks: Yeah.

Beasley: And so, um, it would be wrong if I told you that I absolutely expected to win this race, but I knew it was worth the investment of time and effort, um, to give it a try.

Brooks: Yeah. And then, tell me about how you found out that you won.

Beasley: Um, at the time, everybody in Fayetteville gathered at a specific hotel, and that's where the election returns came in, and so, as a part of that evening, I think we had a suite where many of my supporters were gathered. And so we were checking in with the central area where the returns were coming in locally, but of course we needed to know the statewide numbers as well, and so I think we had the TV going, and we could hear. And so I remember, fairly early on in the evening, I got a call from my consultant, who said, "This race is yours." And I'm like, "But there's so many other counties out—what are you saying? I mean, how do we really know?" He said, "Nope, this race is yours. When we looked at the other counties that are reporting in or left to report, you've won this race." I wasn't really ready to accept that at that point. I just thought, you know, "We really don't—how can we possibly know?" And I wasn't a consultant and certainly had absolutely no experience in statewide races, other than one that I helped our local, um, then-judge Timmons-Goodson, when she was appointed to the court of appeals, to run for her race. I was still practicing law, um, which was great to see and be a part of, but I didn't really have any real experience or knowledge, and so, once it became abundantly clear, it was just a really powerful moment, and everybody was really excited.

Brooks: Did you have any way of celebrating?

Beasley: Well, we, you know, as a part of that evening, and since all the local candidates were there, everybody was celebrating the whole evening, celebrating various victories, and certainly there was a lot of celebration. The radio station comes, and they're interviewing people, and it was just a really great evening of jubilation. Um, I remember our pastor was there and his wife, and our church members, and everybody was really very excited. It was just a great gathering of community,

and friends, and folks who had worked so hard and been invested, as well, and so people don't have to care like that; people don't have to take their time like that. It's such an honor that people come together and are such an important part of the journey.

Brooks: So, this was—I have your bio here, and it says that this election made you the first African American woman elected in any statewide race without first being appointed to the office.

Beasley: That's correct.

Brooks: Um, how does that make you feel?

Beasley: Um, it's awesome on the one hand, and on the other hand, I mean, it's 2019, and that was in 2008, and that wasn't really, comparatively speaking, that long ago. The beauty, I think, is that, every time there's a first, it opens the door, and it makes it more believable and more conceivable that it can happen over and over again, and not just that it can happen but that it should happen—that it's important that our courts be reflective of the population of the state. It's important that we have diverse courts—diverse in race and gender, and geographic location, and profession, and experiences—all of those kinds of diversities are very important in making sure that we have the best courts possible, in addition, of course, to having capable people to do the work.

[00:49:50]

Brooks: And so, this was 2008; it was another very big first for the nation.

Beasley: It was.

Brooks: Did you—was that even in your mind, just kind of like being part of that—did it feel like a moment in time type of thing, or was that separate from—

Beasley: Um, it was separate, but it wasn't lost on me at all. I mean, it was a powerful year. And there were so many people who supported me, who were very engaged in national politics, and who—and people around me who supported me, but who never, ever, ever thought they'd see the day that this nation would elect an African American president. And so, while it was separate because I had my own election, I mean, I didn't—I had friends who went to Denver when the president—or the future president—and the first lady and the children were out there. I had friends who were, you know, campaigning, and I had friends who were very much engaged in that election. So it was separate, to that extent, because I wasn't engaged in that election; I was in my own election wholeheartedly. But I am a citizen of the United States, and that was my president, and how earth-shattering in so many ways—to be elected at the same time that he was elected was pretty awesome.

Brooks: So, let's talk a little bit about your time on the court of appeals, and kind of what was your day-to-day of the big things you did?

Beasley: You know, at the court it's not a trial court. It's a court that hears cases in panels of three, and I will tell you, one of—there were a couple great transitions, you know, being a trial judge, everybody's kind of coming to you all day long, and so at the court of appeals, you know, because there're no witnesses, there are not lawyers coming to the halls of the courthouse, generally speaking, no clerk's office staff, in the same way, no probation officers, none of that. I mean, it was just kinda weird, initially, that—it was just weird, initially, not to have all that kind of bustling around and going to court every day in the same kinda way. And then the other piece, too, was making decisions with two other people on the panel. That, you know, at the trial level, you know, I was the judge and the decider, if you will, and then so coming together and really working with two other judges was just quite an adaptation, if you will. It was a great experience. I loved every single day at the court of appeals. I had great colleagues, um, who were very thoughtful in making decisions, and it was just awesome.

Brooks: And so, three judges hear a case simultaneously, but how many judges are on the court of appeals?

Beasley: Fifteen.

Brooks: Wow. Okay. And then how is it decided which three will hear which cases?

Beasley: There is sort of a random, if you will, compiling of how the panels are set up, and then so one judge of the three judges writes the decision for the particular case, unless there's a dissenting judge, and so one judge writes the majority opinion, and the other judge writes the dissenting opinion.

Brooks: Okay. Did you have—I guess I wanna hear a little bit more about that kind of making decisions with other people, and challenges you might've faced, and how you dealt with that.

Beasley: Well, you know, it's, um, I guess the challenge was only in the making the adjustment to confer with two other people, and to just think differently around what that looks like, and whether or not I'm making a decision by myself, or there're three of us who are making decisions. And so that, in and of itself, was an adjustment, and it was actually great, um, conferring with the other two judges. And in most of our decisions, whether it's on the court of appeals or the supreme court—they tend to be unanimous, but there are times that we disagree. But I think in the ways that we disagree, I mean, everybody was always very respectful, and I also think that those kinds of disagreements in the ways that we interpret the law make us better, but I think it also makes our jurisprudence better.

[00:55:21]

Brooks: Um, anything else about your time on the court of appeals that is notable?

Beasley: Um, it was a great time. I felt that the work was very meaningful, and, much like here, where the general public may have no idea about what the decisions are, um, we were at the court of appeals and here at the supreme court are affecting people's lives every single day. And so, to be tasked with doing that is an awesome responsibility, and what an honor to be able to do it, but hugely rewarding, too. I really enjoyed the work.

Brooks: So generally speaking, cases would come to the court of appeals if they had gone through the other, the district or the superior, you said—

Beasley: That's correct.

Brooks: —court levels, and whoever wanted to appeal, and then depending on your decision at the court of appeals it would either go to the supreme court, or it would be stopped there.

Beasley: That's correct, yes.

Brooks: What do you—what's the—I think this is gonna be too broad of a question, but what's the—as a person who doesn't really know that much about the judicial system, and as we've kind of talked about these teachable moments—are there any things that people kind of consistently get wrong, or just the things that you really wish people would know, that doesn't seem to be in the brains of the general public? [laughs]

Beasley: Um, I don't know about consistently get wrong. I mean, it's kinda hard, I think, for people to even, really, understand often what happens in our local courts. You know, people come to court, not when things are great in their lives, generally speaking, but there tends to be some kind of crisis or there's something wrong, and they're coming to the court for a fair and just resolution of the matter. So, people often come to court, and they are vulnerable or something's happened, and so just understanding the process can be challenging for folks. It can be very difficult. We probably have, in some cases, sixty to seventy percent of people who come to court show up *pro se*, or representing themselves, and so just understanding the process can be very difficult. I guess the one thing I would ask people to do, and would want folks to do, is to ask a lot of questions. I think it's important to be informed as best you can, but just explaining, at times, you know, what it is these respective courts do and how these processes work can be challenging, so it can be a lot. So I would ask people to ask a lot of questions and to get as much information beforehand as possible.

Brooks: Um, so you're on the court of appeals for about four years.

Beasley: That's correct.

Brooks: And then you were appointed to the supreme court.

Beasley: Yes.

Brooks: Tell me a little bit about that.

Beasley: Um, I—my predecessor, Justice Timmons-Goodson, who is also from Fayetteville, retired from the supreme court in 2012 after, I wanna say, roughly twenty-seven years of service. That's a long time. And I remember the day she called me to say she was retiring, and the only thing I could think about was I couldn't even imagine the judiciary without her. She has had a lot of firsts herself and really blazed trails for so many of us who've come behind her. And I just remember being so shocked. I remember the day. I remember it being crisp—November, right before Thanksgiving—and it just didn't seem right. It was hard to fathom. And we were gonna be traveling for Thanksgiving, and I was just kinda talking, you know, with my family and my friends, and all of a sudden my phone started ringing, and I had folks calling to say, as the word started to get out, "You have to go for this."

[00:59:57]

Beasley: And I thought, "Wow, really." This wasn't really a part of what I had thought about, and, um, I knew I didn't have a lot of time to think about it, though, because I knew that—I perceived—that Governor Perdue would make an appointment before she left office, and that was November, around Thanksgiving, and she would be leaving office by the end of December and would be making an appointment pretty soon, and so, upon my return, I submitted my letter of interest, um, had folks to call on my behalf, and was shortly thereafter appointed.

Brooks: So, it sounds like you didn't have a ton of time to think about it.

Beasley: I did not have a ton of time to think about it, but my husband and I, of course, discussed it, and, um, we said yes.

Brooks: [laughs] And then you were appointed.

Beasley: And I was appointed.

Brooks: Wow. And so, I guess I'm just wondering kind of what was going through your mind at the time, when you heard the word that you'd been appointed.

Beasley: Um, the governor called, and I, in fact, I believe every time I've been appointed, the governor called. So to receive that phone call from the governor is amazing, and to hear the words is powerful, and it was awesome to be appointed by the first woman governor for the state of North Carolina, and I knew and know her, and I was honored that she would think and place her trust and confidence in my ability to do this work. That's pretty awesome.

Brooks: Yeah. So, just to back up, your time on the court of appeals, is that a term limit type of situation?

Beasley: There—it's an eight-year term.

Brooks: Okay, so you're about halfway through—

Beasley: That's correct.

Brooks: —your term. Tell me a little bit about how—or what the differences were, once you got on the supreme court, from being on the appeals court.

Beasley: In some ways, they didn't feel quite as stark to me. You know I'd already worked with three judges, and so working with six more justices, you know, I was used to conferring with others. But, you know, the reality is, you know, I mean you've got seven independent-thinking folks who are all working very hard to make sound decisions for the people of North Carolina, and so sometimes they can take a little bit longer. But I don't think that the adjustments were—didn't feel as great. There certainly are different adjustments because the work is different here, in a lot of ways, but it didn't—and I guess because the adjustment to the court of appeals also meant that my family was relocating to Raleigh, so we had lots of adjustments around that particular election.

Brooks: But you were—so then you were here—you didn't have to move—for the supreme court.

Beasley: No, didn't have to move, in fact, just moved across the street. [both laughing]

Brooks: Mm, all around the capital, great. And then, so in 2018 you got your LLM?

Beasley: Yes.

Brooks: From Duke? What does LLM stand for?

Beasley: It's a Master of Laws.

Brooks: Okay. Great. And what was the decision behind going to go for that?

Beasley: Um, the program started in—I believe the first class was 2012. And I started to apply for that class, and I just didn't. It hadn't been that long before that my mom had passed, and it just didn't feel like the right time. And, um, when I applied and was accepted for the 2016 class—so that was the third class—this was a new program—it felt like the right time, and it was absolutely amazing. It was so wonderful. I hadn't thought about—well, I had thought about going back to school, and I actually thought about getting my master's in divinity, not to preach, but just to kind of delve in a little bit more deeply, and this opportunity worked itself out, and it was amazing to go back to school at my age [laughs]. It was amazing to be with my classmates who were judges, federal and state, from across the country and world—we had international judges as well. It was amazing to work with them; it was amazing to work with my professors, who challenged us.

[01:05:12]

And that doesn't happen a whole lot, as a judge, and it was great to be pushed in that way. It was great to be, um, pushed and challenged and really, strongly encouraged to really think outside of our comfort zones, and to think about the law and the application of the law and how we apply the law, in a more global and contextual sense. So, it was awesome.

Brooks: Yeah. What were you hoping to get out of it when you started?

Beasley: Um, I had hoped for that, but I'm not sure that I had hoped for it in the way that it actually happened. And, you know, be mindful that, um, for the other judges who were not from North Carolina, for the most part they were able to sort of take a leave and come here and do this work, and because—I had a couple colleagues who were also from North Carolina who did this—we were still working full time and then also in school. But it was, um—I'm not sure that I really expected my relationships with my classmates to be so fruitful. I mean, even since we've graduated, we've been in touch with each other, and we've worked together on projects, and those relationships feel like they are long-standing, as well as with my professors. Um, so going back to law school the second time around was so much better [both laughing] in so many ways. Great growth the first time around, so I don't wanna knock that experience, but I mean, I was in, obviously, a much different place the second time around, and so I appreciated it very differently.

Brooks: Great. Um, and then that takes us to about now. You were recently appointed the chief justice of the supreme court. So, tell me a little bit about that.

Beasley: Um, in much the same way as my decision to run for the court of appeals and my decision to seek appointment to the supreme court, we got word from our former chief justice that he was retiring, and as the word started to get out, my phone started ringing. Folks were saying, "Cheri, you really oughtta think about doing this." And I sought the appointment, and, uh, and this time it wasn't a call from the governor. I met with the governor, but then I went back over to meet with him, and then that's when he told me.

Brooks: Were you surprised?

Beasley: You know, I was. I mean, any time you hear that kind of news—hearing it, and the confirmation of the news, is a surprise. There were very talented who sought the appointment, many very talented people, and so to be chosen was, again, awesome. It was awesome. So yes, I was surprised. I was surprised.

Brooks: And that was earlier this year—

Beasley: It was.

Brooks: —in, was it March of 2019?

Beasley: March, yes.

Brooks: Okay, so that's a little bit new still.

Beasley: He announced it on, I believe, February 12, and I turned fifty-three on February 14.

Brooks: Right. Wow, that's a lot at once. That's great. Um, so I think, since that brings us to here in your career, I kinda wanna back up and talk a little bit, like, reflections and some questions that I tend to ask everybody in these interviews, and so your answers can be about kind of any stage of your life or your career. Um, so what have been some of the biggest challenges you've faced? And they can be things we've talked about that you can expand on, or if there are things you haven't mentioned.

Beasley: You know, the question I usually get is, you know, "What has it been like being an African American woman on this journey?" And the reality is, I don't really know any other way to be. There have certainly been challenges along the way, and some of them may have even been based on race and/or gender, but I really—because I really have been really intentional about being involved in my community and being involved with my friends and really embracing community and having that support—I just haven't felt discouraged when I feel those kinds of challenges.

[01:10:12]

And honestly, in so many ways, I think those challenges just make me stronger, um, and more determined.

Brooks: What type of advice do you have for folks who might be facing similar challenges?

Beasley: Challenges, period, 'cause there's always something, and we only see what we see because whatever it is our own challenges are, but challenges are challenges. And I would say, you know, we often—and I do say this. I say this especially to young people, but I say it all the time. I think we often, when challenges or when opportunities come our way, we see other people as being more talented, more connected, smarter, in some way better suited for the opportunity. And I would just encourage people not to count themselves out—to really think about all the ways that they are talented themselves—that they are smart. And it doesn't mean you have to know all the answers; in fact, it's important to always have people around you who are also smart and talented and willing and ready to serve, and so I think we have to be careful about counting ourselves out, and that, when we see that there might be challenges or obstacles, that we should allow those times to really be mindful, um, and see those as times of really strengthening ourselves.

Brooks: Um, what's your definition of success, and how has it changed over time?

Beasley: What is my definition of success, and how has it changed over time? It's funny you would say that, especially since I'm a mom of eighteen-year-old sons who just finished their first year in college, and I see how they define success, and frankly it is often—and I'm sure I was guilty of the same—in very esoteric terms, uh, and things that tend not to really matter in the long-term. That, you know, I think it's important to always work hard, and I don't know that it's always important to know what the goal is. And that's what I see in my sons and young people around them. They feel like they gotta know right now; they gotta know what it is they wanna do; they gotta know what it is—I don't know how you can possibly know at eighteen what it is you wanna do and how you wanna do it for the rest of your life. And so, um, how I'm sure I'd probably define success—and let's be frank, also, that my sons are standing in my shadow, if you will, and so I appreciate that—but I also stood in my mom's shadow. She was—she had her PhD by the time she was thirty-six years old. And so, in some ways, I am sure that I thought that her standard had to be my standard. So, I'm sure I thought about, um, those kinds of things, that I—and I don't know that I necessarily thought PhD by thirty-six—but I thought about those kinds of milestones, and how they had happened, and how methodical I needed to be. And now I am certain that it is important to be prepared, and often you don't really know how you're preparing yourself and for what, but I do know it's important to be open. I know it's important to appreciate for yourself that you're okay and appreciate for yourself that you're smart and that you're talented, and that the goals really shouldn't be such that you always feel like you're swimming upstream, that it's important to really be and enjoy. And honestly, I believe that those are a part of being successful—to really appreciate that the journey is what makes it all worth it—I mean, you don't start off being chief justice [laughs], you just don't do that—that there's supposed to be some bumps and bruises along the way. But the journey is really what makes it so purposeful, which makes us so purposeful, and it makes life so meaningful.

[01:15:06]

Brooks: What are some of the other things that you are hoping to accomplish, personally or professionally?

Beasley: Well, we have an amazing judicial branch of government, and so I am hopeful that I will be leading it for some time, that I can be supportive to the 6500 people who make up the branch: elected judges, elected DAs, public defenders, clerks of court, magistrates, judicial support, court reporters, and a whole host of other folks who make up the 102 courthouses across the state. There's a lot of work to do, and, um, most of these folks are working really, really hard with limited resources, and so in a way that we can be supportive and provide resources to them, so that they can do their jobs better and more efficiently and provide better services to the public, I want to be supportive of that.

Brooks: I think I noted that you have some specific campaigns that you're kinda focused on, I saw an address you gave recently that was kind of focused on wellness, kind of the idea of, like, work-life balance, kinda like what we talked about before, is that something that's pretty important for you?

Beasley: I believe the speech you're talking about was before the North Carolina Bar Association, and that was their theme for the conference.

Brooks: Ah, okay.

Beasley: What I really talked about was the initiatives that we are focused on through the court system, and that we're working in a whole eCourts model where we completely revamp our computer systems. In the one hundred counties, we don't have computer systems that can talk to each other, and as people are mobile, it matters, and if they have a matter in Buncombe County, Asheville, that our computer system be able to talk to the computer system in New Hanover, Wilmington, that we shouldn't be walking files literally from one courthouse to the next in places where—in rural communities, where it might be twenty miles for somebody to get to the courthouse—there ought to be a way for them to access so much of what we do in our courts online. To pay a traffic ticket, you can only do that in very few places across the state, and so those are the kinds of things we're looking at. We're looking at increasing recovery courts. You know, we all know about the opioid crisis, but, in reality, substance misuse has been an issue in North Carolina, and around the country, for years and years and years. And so, in North Carolina, where there have been two thousand people that died last year, we need to be responsible. And so, I think in ways that we think about how courts address disputes, we have to think about how we can also be a part of solutions. Those are community-based solutions. And so, I think it's important, in thinking about recovery courts, that people be held accountable, but that if we can in some way help them to recover their lives, and be productive, that we oughtta be a part of that. And so there are a host of things we're doing. We've got school justice partnerships forming. There's one in New Hanover County, but there are others that are being formed across the state, where we know that last year there were 11,000 young people referred to the juvenile justice system from the schools, and so how do we, as law enforcement, and courts, DAs, and public health, and the school system, come together to make sure that young people can be successful. And all that's really a part of being a response to the raise the age requirement that the legislature passed. Um, I think we're the last state in the country to do that. So there are a host of things that we're looking at doing, and I'm really excited about it.

Personally, I have to tell you I am—I've got two eighteen-year-olds, so they're in school; they're in college, and, you know, I want them to be healthy and adjusted well and excited about their own futures—and I wanna be supportive to them. And I also—I'm gonna run my campaign, and work really hard, and trust that I

will be successful next year in this campaign. I'm gonna enjoy that part. I'm gonna enjoy running, and keeping quite a pace, by the way, and also doing the work of the court and leading the court. Um, but I'm gonna really enjoy this journey. I'm going to be grateful, 'cause this didn't have to be, and I wanna be an inspiration. So many folks have embraced this victory if you will. I mean, literally, we heard from people from all over the world when I got the appointment.

[01:20:03]

One of four ever African American women to serve as chief justice in the country, and one of two now currently serving, so not a lot of folks. And so people are excited. And so for justice, for being supportive of and improving our courts, and being supportive of those who serve in the courts every single day and work really, really hard, and for bettering our communities, and thinking about ways that our system is already a part of making a difference in communities, and going forward with that. I mean, that's a professional goal, but it's also a personal goal, because my service really does make a difference, and I'm comfortable in that and wanna make sure that I stay here. It's important that I stay here for some time.

Brooks: I think that kind of goes to what I was gonna ask next, which is do you feel—is there pressure that comes with being a first and being a role model to folks?

Beasley: Um, I—yes. And there's, probably, the first time I've ever said yes. [Brooks laughs] There is pressure.

Brooks: And how do you handle it?

Beasley: The same way. [laughs] Family, friends, community, and really basking in the moment, really taking the time to appreciate the importance of this moment, but also encouraging others. This journey isn't really just for me or about me, and if I think that it is, I've probably failed greatly. But it is important to make sure that there are folks who come behind me, who are doing great things in their own way, not in my shadow, but realizing for themselves that they really are capable, and that the moment for them is probably now, and they don't even realize it.

Brooks: Do you feel like there's—I'm trying to figure out how to phrase this—I might come back to that. Um, is there anything that you think you would've done differently with your career?

Beasley: If I had, I would've messed it all up, right? [Brooks laughs] I mean, this plan clearly is not one that I could've carved out for myself. So being ready and being open for opportunity, those are not the kinds of things that we can really plan for. I've had an amazing career, so no, I would not have done it. In hindsight, I mean, you know, if you'd asked me this twenty years ago, when I was still really young and still trying to figure it all out, I would've probably given you a list of things I would've changed, believing that so much of this was truly in my control in terms of timing and planning and all of that. And it just isn't.

Brooks: Um, trying to be mindful of the time, but this is a question that I've tried to ask everyone I've interviewed for this project so far. In your opinion, what is a notable woman?

Beasley: What is a notable woman? Um, probably a woman who has done something notable, but I think more than that. It's probably a woman who has a sense of herself and has probably defined for herself her own sense of purpose, because I don't think you can do what we all think about success looking like unless, in some way, you have embraced for yourself your own purpose and your own direction. Even if you can't clearly define it, you're clear that you have a purpose, and you're clear, um, that the work that you do is meaningful and changes lives. I think if we work in a vacuum, we've probably missed the boat in terms of what our responsibilities are to people around us. But our work has to be purposeful; it has to be meaningful.

Brooks: And do you think that what defines notable woman is anything different from what defines a notable man?

Beasley: Yes, I do, because being a woman is different from being a man. Our experiences are different in so many areas, and I'm sure in all the folks that you're talking to, these are women who have blazed trails. These are women who have, by their determination, have changed the course of their lives and the lives of people around them and changed the course of history, and they dare to do it.

[01:25:15]

Brooks: What else? Anything that I missed, or topics we didn't cover?

Beasley: Well, and I would say, also—and they often haven't seen people who are like them to have done it before them, and so they really have had to carve out for themselves what that's supposed to look like.

Brooks: Yeah, I found that really interesting in that when you're talking about the firsts, and they are very exciting, but it's also kind of the double-edged sword where it's like, "But we're in 2019." Um, but the idea that you, in your position, that helps other women, all women, but especially black women, see, like, "Oh, that's a person that looks like me; I can do that job." So, as important as it is to be the first, part of that importance is because it opens the door, or keeps the door open, essentially, for those behind you.

Beasley: It does, and I do hope it's all women, though, because I'm only the fourth woman. This court is celebrating its 200th anniversary this year, um, only the fourth woman to serve as chief justice of this court, and so the history is modern history. And only the second African American woman and the eighth African American. It's all recent issues. Of all those folks, only one is deceased; that's recent history.

Brooks: Certainly. And do you have anything to say to folks who, similar to how people have talked about Barack Obama, in terms of, "Solved it! We had one, so that solves the problem," or, you know, "What more can we do?" How do you kind of rebut that argument?

Beasley: Um, if it's still notable that we have one, and if it's important that we have diverse leadership—and I believe it is—then the fact that we had one means that we—and I'm talking specifically about myself and Chief Justice Henry Fry—means that it's important that the one just got the ball rolling, but the ball has to keep rolling. It has to keep rolling. If we are really supposed to be reflective of who we are as a state and a nation, the ball has to keep rolling. And for every one of us in public service, the seat is not ours. We are always required to pass the seat on to somebody else, which means the ball necessarily keeps rolling. And so it means that the seat must perpetually be a diverse seat, that people from all walks of life, from all demographics, should at some point hold this seat.

Brooks: So, we have a little bit more time. Is there anything we haven't touched on that you wanna talk about?

Beasley: I can't think of anything.

Brooks: I do—I am curious, because it seems like you were very influenced by your mother, and you talked a lot about her—how she seemed to you, and kind of how she served as a role model to you—are there any specific things that she taught you, that you feel you've really carried with you through your career?

Beasley: Um, I think what she taught—and most of her teaching was by example—was that service is very important. It has to be the essence of who we are, and it's just the purpose for our being. I only remember seeing her—even when she was a professor, she was always very engaged in the community and very engaged in, um, in making contributions to people who were less fortunate, always.

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She was a scholar, and also nationally active, not just in her field. Um, and so she also taught me, by example, to—and I keep saying being open, but it really is more than being open—um, but to not be afraid to go for it. To see yourself as the person who just might be fit for this opportunity, and she taught me a lot about the power around womanhood, and all of this was by example.

Brooks: What does that mean to you, the power behind womanhood?

Beasley: Well, that, you know, historically—and we don't have to go far in history—in many areas of our lives, women have, for whatever reasons, not been seen in the most prominent leadership roles, whether we're talking about corporations or judgeships or whatever it is. Um, but that that shouldn't be the barrier that prohibits us from taking the chance and going forward.

Brooks: What was your mom's name?

Beasley: Lou Beasley.

Brooks: Great. Alright. I think that's a good place to end if you're okay with that.

Beasley: I'm okay with it.

Brooks: Alright, great, I'll turn this off. Thank you.

[01:31:46] [End of Interview]